

Reflecting a Nation
Stories from the Census

A History of the Australian Census of Population and Housing

July 2011



For a brighter future

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A History of the Australian Census of Population and Housing

This article was contributed by Beth Wright who is undertaking a PhD on the History of the Australian Census at the Australian National University.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should use caution reading this article, as it contains images of persons who are now deceased.

Users are warned that this article contains quotations from historical sources which contain language or views which, reflecting the authors' attitudes or that of the period in which the item was written, may be considered to be inappropriate or offensive today.

The year 2011 marks 100 years since the first Commonwealth Census of Population and Housing was run in 1911.

Although it was the first national Census, the 1911 Census drew on a long history of colonial and state censuses in Australia. From the earliest days of the First Fleet, 'musters' were held to count convicts and settlers, as well as to collect essential information such as how many people were reliant on government stores for food. Musters evolved into formal censuses, the first of which was the New South Wales census of 1828. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Australian states were cooperating to hold censuses every ten years on the same day, a day chosen to coincide with other censuses in the British Empire. The 'Federation Census' of 1901 was the last of these coordinated state censuses.



Littleton Groom |
National Library of
Australia

The Commonwealth was granted the power to run censuses and collect statistics in the Australian Constitution, which came into effect on 1 January 1901. The *Census and Statistics Act 1905* was brought to the parliament by Littleton Groom, then Home Affairs Minister in the Deakin Government. It was one of the earliest pieces of legislation to be passed by the newly formed commonwealth government, creating the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics (which would later become the Australian Bureau of Statistics) and the position of Commonwealth Statistician. Under the Act, Censuses were to be held every ten years, commencing from 1911. A mandatory set of topics was specified and other topics of national importance could be added by regulation.

The First Australian Census of Population and Housing

The first Commonwealth Statistician was George Knibbs. A man of wide interests and education, he began his career as a licensed surveyor in government service. In 1905, he was acting Professor of Physics at the



George Knibbs |
ABS collection

The Constitution included a clause specifying that 'aboriginal natives' were not to be included in official population counts.

University of Sydney and Superintendent of Technical Education for New South Wales. He was appointed Commonwealth Statistician in 1906 and promptly toured the various state statistical offices to learn about their methods and also to headhunt staff interested in moving to the national office. By the end of 1906 he had established the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics (CBCS) in Melbourne with a small number of staff gleaned from the various state offices.

One of the early decisions he had to make about the Census was whether to invest in hiring mechanical tabulation machines, which were used to process the census in the United States and some European countries. A 1909 fact-finding trip overseas left him unimpressed, concluding that, given Australia's small population, mechanical tabulation would not provide benefits that justified the cost. Instead, Knibbs aimed to increase efficiency by producing the first Commonwealth Census forms on stiff cards that could themselves be sorted, eliminating the phase of transferring information from paper forms to punch cards which would be needed with mechanical tabulation.

The first national Census contained many questions which had been included in state censuses and are familiar to us today because they are still in the Australian Census. The topics covered included age, sex, marital status, occupation, birthplace, whether the householder owned or rented their property and religion. The Australian Census was unusual in including a religion question, considered too intrusive in Britain. However, the Australian people were used to this question, because state censuses had included it, originally to help decide the division of funds allocated to assist schools. It had for some time been a non-compulsory question and remained so in the national Census.

The 1911 Census also included some questions which are no longer asked, which reflected the views and concerns of that period of Australian history. It asked about race, reflecting the focus of the time on a White Australia Policy. It asked whether a person was blind, deaf or dumb, with Knibbs commenting 'the possession of reliable information ... is of no little value and importance in the interests of the unfortunate persons who are so afflicted.' [\(Endnote 1\)](#) In fact, Census data later helped researchers to understand the role played by epidemics in particular years in affecting pregnant women and causing more children to be born with these conditions. As some of the population had received little or no schooling, there was a question asking people whether they could read and/or write. There was also a question on the types of materials the outer walls of dwellings were constructed from, at a time when housing materials ranged from stone to hessian and calico.

Knibbs also sought to include some other questions in the first Census although he knew they would be considered sensitive. He suggested adding them to the form in such a way that they could be sealed from the view of the Census collector. These were questions about salaries and wages, hours worked, abstinence from alcohol, and the money people had in their possession on Census night (to determine the amount and type of currency in circulation in the nation). These questions had the support of the Minister for Home Affairs, King O'Malley, but received some criticism in the press as 'inquisitorial' and were rejected in the Senate. [\(Endnote 2\)](#) In fact, in demanding scheduled time to consider a motion to disapprove these more controversial topics, opponents of the questions established the concept of the 'Business of the Senate'.

Knibbs also wrestled with the question of how to cover Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Census. The Constitution included a clause specifying that 'aboriginal natives' were not to be included in official population counts. This may have been partly because some states did not wish Queensland and Western Australia to gain seats in parliament on the strength

of their larger Indigenous populations. In 1900, the Commonwealth Attorney-General advised that 'half-caste' Aboriginal people should be included in official population counts. Although those regarded as 'full-blood' could not to be included in the official figures, they could be counted in the Census.

In the 1908 Yearbook, Knibbs discussed the inadequate information on the Aboriginal population as a whole and said 'It is proposed to make an attempt to enumerate the aboriginal population of Australia in connection with the first Commonwealth Census in 1911.' ([Endnote 3](#)) However, a way to accurately determine the total number of Indigenous people in Australia was not found at this time. The final instructions for Census collectors were that 'all aborigines and half-caste aborigines who are civilised or semi-civilised, and who are either in employment or living in proximity to settlements, are to be enumerated' but 'no attempt need be made to obtain any particulars concerning aborigines in your district who are living in a purely wild state'. ([Endnote 4](#)) The constitutional requirements meant that the official tables of the population of the Commonwealth of Australia excluded 'full-blood' Aboriginal people, even though some had been included in the Census count. From the mid-1920s, the Bureau separately published regular information on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, based partly on estimates and partly on counts acquired from the State Aboriginal Protectors.

In this first Census, the process of giving out and gathering back the forms met with the usual Australian difficulties, that is to say, 'droughts' (in South Australia) and 'flooding rains' (in Queensland).



A Census collector with Indigenous people in the Boonah-Fassifern district of Queensland in 1911 |
The Brisbane Courier 13 May 1911

In this first Census, the process of giving out and gathering back the forms met with the usual Australian difficulties, that is to say, 'droughts' (in South Australia) and 'flooding rains' (in Queensland). Once collected, the Census was compiled almost entirely by hand, with the help of only a few basic adding machines. About 250 temporary staff sorted over 4 million cards into piles according to the answers to particular questions. Each pile was totalled, then the cards were re-sorted according to the answers to the next question. The main work began in August 1911 and was completed by the end of June 1912.

In 1913, Charles Wickens was appointed Supervisor of the Census to oversee the remaining work of tabulating and analysing the data. Two volumes of tables were published in 1914, but the final Statistician's Report was not released until 1917, six years after the Census. This was due to the outbreak of World War I,

which meant changed arrangements within the Bureau. During the war, the Bureau conducted a 'war census' and a 'wealth census' under special legislation. Rather than true Censuses, they were registers of manpower and assets respectively, based on mail-back cards available from Post Offices. The war also affected the Bureau in an immediate way: of the 29 male staff in the Bureau in 1915, nine served in the military, four of whom died overseas.

From war to depression – the Censuses of 1921 and 1933

The next Census was expected to be held in 1931 but was cancelled in 1930. At that time Australia was in the grip of the Great Depression. The federal and state governments were struggling with debt repayments and introduced austerity measures curbing government spending.

Preparatory work for the 1921 Census was done under the direction of Knibbs while he was still Commonwealth Statistician, with Charles Wickens directly in charge. When Knibbs left in 1921, Wickens was appointed the second Commonwealth Statistician.

In a new arrangement which lasted until the 1980s, the bulk of the collection work for the 1921 Census was undertaken by the Commonwealth Electoral Office, which had a network of staff located throughout Australia.

In the early 1920s Australia was concerned with post-war reconstruction, with some special schemes in place for returned servicemen and many delayed infrastructure projects going ahead. In line with this, preference was given to ex-servicemen in filling the temporary positions to tabulate the Census.

In a change from 1911, it was decided to hire automatic tabulating machines for use on the Census. These were Hollerith machines, similar to those developed for tabulating the US Census. The machines functioned through the use of cards which were punched with holes in specific places. Each position on the card related to a different question and response on the Census form. There were a number of different machines to cover a range of processes: punching the cards, verifying cards were punched correctly, punching multiple cards at once, sorting cards, counting cards and tabulating.

The next Census was expected to be held in 1931 but was cancelled in 1930. At that time Australia was in the grip of the Great Depression. The federal and state governments were struggling with debt repayments and introduced austerity measures curbing government spending. Eventually, the Census was run in 1933 after it was recognised that the Census was an opportunity to understand the impact of the depression and could also provide some temporary employment. Postponing the Census required an amendment to the *Census and Statistics Act 1905* which had specified that Censuses must be held every ten years.

While the running, processing and tabulation of the 1933 Census occurred under the fourth Commonwealth Statistician, Edward McPhee, most of the preparation occurred while the Bureau was under the leadership of the academic and government economic advisor Lyndhurst Giblin. He was asked to step in when Charles Wickens suffered a stroke in 1931.



Lyndhurst Giblin | ABS collection



Charles Edward Rudolph, one of four CBCS staff who died in World War I | Australian War Memorial image no. DA12955



The Jolimont Building, 1929 | National Archives of Australia A3560, 5333

There was no Census for 14 years after the 1933 Census. In 1941, when a Census would otherwise have been held, Australia was at war.

The 1933 Census was the only one run almost entirely from Canberra. The CBCS had moved there in 1928 and was located in West Block but there was not enough space there for the census staff. A Census Office was therefore established in the Jolimont Building in Alinga Street, a weatherboard building which had been relocated from Melbourne. In 1933 the mapping and tabulation were both undertaken in that building. Most of the temporary staff came to Canberra and lived in hostel accommodation for the duration of their employment, although some found accommodation in the nearby town of Queanbeyan. As in 1921, ex-servicemen were given preference in filling these jobs.

Several additional topics were added to the 1933 Census reflecting the concerns of the time regarding the welfare of the population. These included questions on war service, number of dependent children aged less than 16 years in each household, whether children were orphans and income. For the first time, information such as the number of adults earning no income or only a very low income whilst supporting dependent children could be obtained from the Census.

There was no Census for 14 years after the 1933 Census. In 1941, when a Census would otherwise have been held, Australia was at war. As in the First World War, registers of manpower and wealth were conducted under special legislation.



Roland Wilson | ABS collection

Post-war reconstruction Censuses – 1947 and 1954

The 1947 Census was planned and undertaken quickly after the end of the Second World War and was seen as essential for post-war reconstruction of the Australian economy. Its development was directed primarily by Roland Wilson, the youngest ever serving Commonwealth Statistician. He was first appointed in 1936 when he was aged just 32 years. Wilson was a former Rhodes Scholar who had been encouraged by Giblin to move into the Statistician's Branch of the Treasury and while in that role, and then as Statistician, developed statistics which could inform economic policy.

In 1947, the employment questions were re-ordered and revised slightly. A question was used to identify all people undertaking what was termed

The war had highlighted the value of the radio for spreading information. Roland Wilson, in 1947, was the first to use that medium to promote the Census, through a series of radio talks explaining how to fill in the Census form.

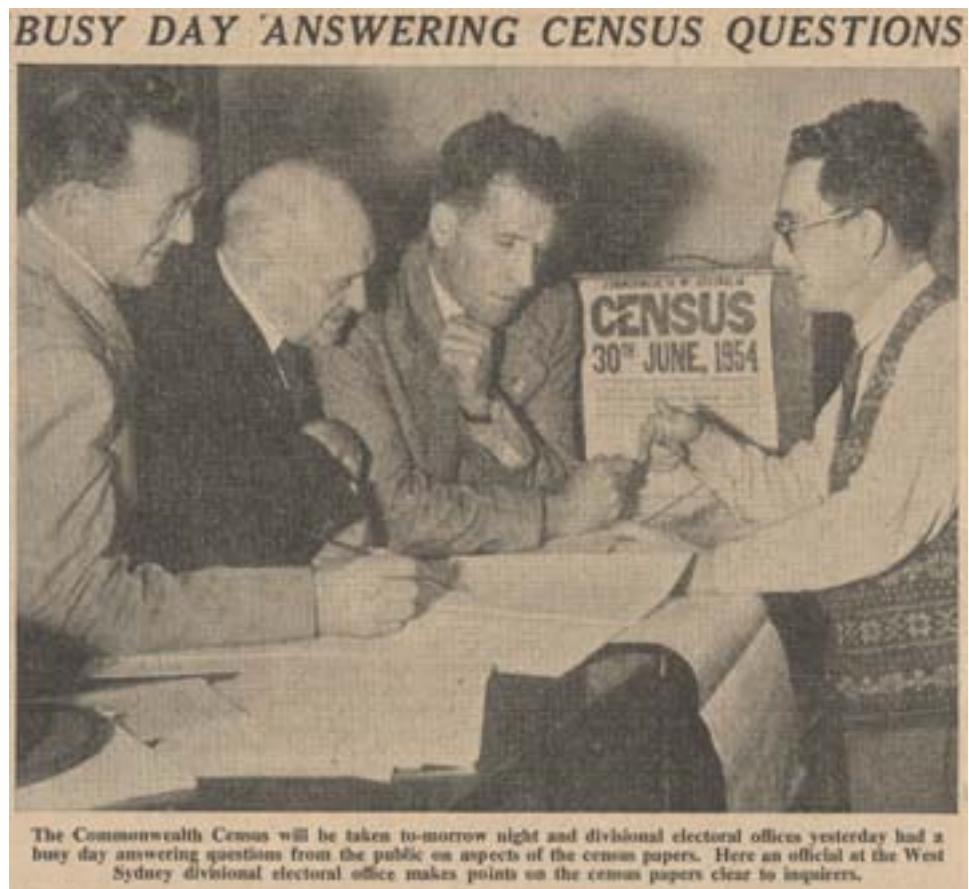
'economic activity' as opposed to people who were not, such as full-time students and housewives.

A significant number of questions about dwellings were added in 1947. These covered the dwelling's gas, electricity and water supply (e.g. do you have flowing water?); its toilet, washing and cooking facilities (e.g. do you have a flush toilet?); and the date when the dwelling was built. Housing shortages, and shortages of building materials, had been a pressing issue both during and after the war. The federal and state governments were attempting various methods of increasing housing stock, including annual Commonwealth-State Housing Agreements from 1945, which directed funds at building public rental housing.

From 1947, Torres Strait Islander people were included in official Australian population totals from the Census, after lobbying by the Queensland State Government. They successfully argued that Torres Strait Islander peoples were not specifically listed for exclusion from population counts in the Constitution, which referred to 'aboriginal natives'.

The war had highlighted the value of the radio for spreading information. Roland Wilson, in 1947, was the first to use that medium to promote the Census, through a series of radio talks explaining how to fill in the Census form. In addition, women's magazines were used for promotion. In particular, the Australian Women's Weekly ran a large piece on the Census focusing on the experiences of collectors. For the first time, the car was the primary method of transport for collectors not able to do their job on foot. However, the Women's Weekly still found collectors travelling by horse and sulky in 1947.

As the 1941 Census had been cancelled and a Census held in 1947, it was decided to run a Census in 1954 as a 'catch-up'. The 1954 Census would fall



West Sydney Electoral Office staff answer questions about the Census | Sydney Morning Herald 1954 29 June p. 3

midway between 1947 and 1961, the year the next ten yearly Census was due, and bring Australia back into step with the timing of other censuses in the British Commonwealth. Stanley Carver was the Commonwealth Statistician at this time. The 1954 Census was notable in that a few years prior, the Bureau hosted the Conference of British Commonwealth Statisticians. This was considered to be a great learning experience for the host nation's staff. While the agenda focused heavily on labour and industry statistics, there was also a session on lessons from recent censuses, with papers contributed by Canada, Ireland and India.

For the 1954 Census, alternative ways of collecting the Census were trialled, including having people mail back Census forms. However, the traditional method of drop off/pick up by collectors was found to be the most successful and remains in use today. The 1954 Census also saw the processing of the Census forms divided between different State capitals, each centre employing temporary staff for the purpose. After the Census, assessments of processing found that this had led to variation in the way answers on Census forms were

coded by the staff in different States, and a single centre has been the favoured option since then. This was the first Census in which coding was formally assessed.

In 1954, most of the new dwelling questions introduced in the previous Census were dropped and only a few other new questions were introduced, such as whether the dwelling included both a kitchen and a bathroom and whether the dwelling was a rural holding.



George Crossman undertaking minor maintenance on a Census Trio machine | Ross Crossman



The Census Trio machine being installed in the Jolimont Building | ABS collection

The Census in a decade of new perspectives – 1961 and 1966

The 1960s saw a new era with five yearly Censuses and new technology fundamentally changing Census-taking. Keith Archer was the Commonwealth Statistician for this period.

The 1961 Census was the last to use tabulating machines. Over time, tabulating machines had become more sophisticated and data could be processed faster. Large 'Census Trio' machines combined the processes of sorting, calculating totals, and producing summary punched cards, which had previously been performed by different machines.

The machines used in 1961 were so large that when delivered they could not fit through the door of the Census Office in Canberra. A large hole had to be cut in the side of the wooden building to install them.

While in 1947 radio had been used for Census publicity for the first time, in 1961 a film advertised the Census in theatres and on television. Paid advertisements appeared in newspapers, including foreign language newspapers. Also, with so many new migrants in the country, a special statement was prepared in seven different languages and distributed to migrant clubs and other meeting places.

New questions included a question on professional qualifications for those employed or looking for work. The 1961 Census content also covered the take-up of new technology, with a question on whether households had a television.

As the Bureau's new Labour Force Survey started around the same time as the 1961 Census, a comparison was made between the two collections. It proved so useful that such comparisons became standard after every Census, allowing the



Computers used to process 1966 Census and staff | National Archives of Australia: A2399, COD40/5 and A2399, COD47/1

The 1966 Census saw the introduction of computer technology to the processing of the Census. This utterly changed the way data was coded, edited, and even what it was possible to collect.

Bureau to identify and qualify differences in results between the two sources of information.

In 1966, for the first time since the colonial period, a Census was run five years after the previous Census, something statisticians had wanted since Federation. Australia has had five yearly Censuses since then, and this became mandatory after an amendment to the *Census and Statistics Act 1905* in 1977. This amendment followed a High Court decision that there must be an electoral redistribution in the life of every parliament, something that had to be based on accurate population estimates.

The 1966 Census saw some really fundamental changes in process. Pilot testing was introduced to evaluate the draft Census schedule. This involved selected households being asked to fill in the schedule, and then to participate in a follow up interview, to identify any problems in design.

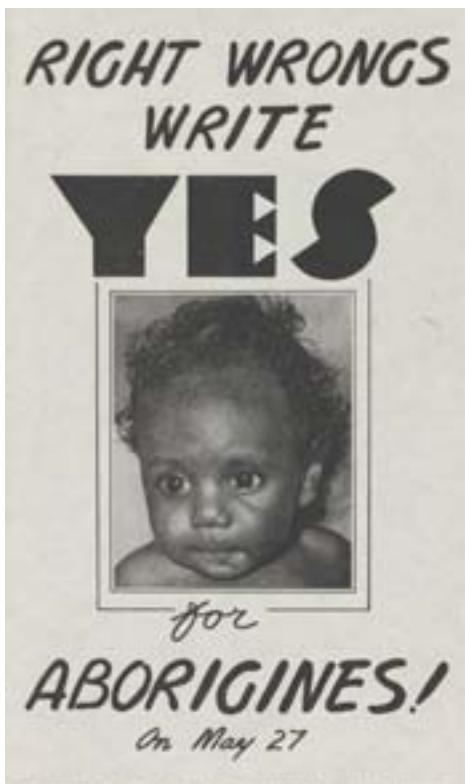
Also for the first time, users of Census data such as other government departments were approached to determine their requirements, prior to the Census. While only a few specific new requests were made, the number of questions did increase between 1961 and 1966. New topics included the number of motor vehicles at a dwelling as well as new questions on education.

The 1966 Census saw the introduction of computer technology to the processing of the Census. This utterly changed the way data was coded, edited, and even what it was possible to collect. In particular the new technology allowed family relationships to be far more comprehensively examined. The Bureau also began to spend considerably more time talking to clients to determine what their needs were before running and releasing tables. This Census also saw the cancelling of the Statistician's Report. Five yearly Censuses, combined with the long time needed to produce the report, made it less practicable, especially given the developing alternative of customised tables.



Census collector, Papua New Guinea, 1966 | ABS collection

In 1966, the Bureau was asked to assist in conducting a census in the Territory of Papua New Guinea. Previously, censuses had only been run in the cities and towns. It was decided to run a 10% sample of the entire population, including remote villages. It proved difficult to obtain ages in remote areas where there had been no birth records kept, so some inventive techniques were used to extrapolate age. A list of notable dates was prepared for each district and each adult respondent was asked to identify an event they could remember as a child. For example, they might be asked 'Can you remember when Father Ryan first arrived?', an event



FCAATSI poster, 1967 referendum | The Papers of Gordon Bryant (MS 8256); National Library of Australia

that happened in 1912. They were then asked to point to a child who was around the same age as they had been when Father Ryan arrived. The collector then used the child's age and the date of the event to get the approximate date of birth of the adult.

The other really significant event for the population Census in the 1960s occurred after the 1966 Census. Calls for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have the same rights as other Australians, resulted in a referendum in 1967. The highest yes vote ever recorded in a referendum ensured that Section 127 of the Constitution was abolished and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were to be included in population counts resulting from the Census.

Privacy and change impacts the Census – 1971 and 1976

In 1970, Jack O'Neill took over as Commonwealth Statistician after Keith Archer retired from the position due to ill health. The 1970s was a time of great expansion in the Census topics. This followed seismic shifts in modern society and moves internationally to compile more social statistics to measure those changes. At the same time, the 1970s saw fresh public awareness of the issues of privacy and confidentiality and how these issues might relate to the Census.

There were substantial changes to Census questions for the 1971 Census. Following the changes to the Constitution, the race question was redesigned, to primarily focus on Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, and the term 'racial origin' replaced 'race'. This was a tick box question with options 'European', 'Aboriginal' 'Torres Strait Islander' and 'Other origin' (which was to be written in). People of more than one origin were asked to identify the group to which they considered themselves to belong. In subsequent Censuses, the question evolved further, to ask only whether people were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, and to enable people to identify themselves as of both these origins.

There were also a number of new questions, particularly about housing and geographic location. Questions included number of dwellings owned or being purchased, method of sewage disposal, number of bedrooms, birthplaces of parents, and address five years ago (which made it possible to study internal migration in Australia). One question covered in the early testing was a question on income but this was dropped before the final Census. There were also physical changes to the Census form.

Instead of one large densely packed sheet as had been used since 1921, the schedule was redesigned into a booklet. It made the form larger but also much easier to follow.

Even prior to the 1971 Census there were protests and dissent over the Census, particularly in relation to privacy. This was stirred up by a television show on government



Newspaper headlines about the 1971 Census

privacy shown one month before the Census. Major newspapers and one political party questioned the inclusion of names on the Census form. However, these protests did not seem to have any impact on the quality of the Census data.

Jack O'Neill oversaw the development of the *Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975* which resulted in the CBCS being transformed into the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and O'Neill becoming the first Australian Statistician. He retired in the same year.



A story board expressing one of the ideas for a media campaign for the 1976 Census | Madison Research Pty Limited.

The 1976 Census included significant changes to content. New topics in this Census included income, handicaps, language use, holidays, childcare, life insurance, vehicle licences, and benefits received. Most of these questions have not been asked since while others have become standard.

To help understand the concerns raised in the media in 1971, the ABS commissioned a study into publicity prior to the 1976 Census. It recommended strategies and a substantial budget for a publicity campaign.



Newspaper headlines about the 1976 Census

The debate surrounding the 1976 Census led to a review by the Law Reform Commission which, while making some recommendations for improvements, fundamentally supported the ABS' methods and processes, including the requirement for names to be collected on the schedule.

Late in 1975, the government changed with the election of the Fraser Coalition Government. The new government would have preferred to make changes to Census content but it was too late to change the schedule as printing was already underway. The new government was cutting expenditure in many departments at the time, and chose to cut Census expenditure including the publicity budget.

The 1976 Census encountered substantial negative publicity as the nation debated the value and purpose of a Census and the importance of privacy. Unfortunately, with a very limited budget the ABS was not able to combat all the misunderstandings (for example, that the Census was investigating mental health) and media concerns raised, particularly about whether names were really needed on the Census form. The new Australian Statistician, Bill Cole, only served from May to December 1976 but in this time strongly defended the Census. Nevertheless, it was estimated that there was a slightly higher undercount of the population for the 1976 Census than for any previous Census.

Meanwhile, the government cut the Census budget further so the 1976 Census was unable to be fully processed. Only age, sex, marital status and birthplace were processed for all people. A 50% sample was processed for the other topics.

The debate surrounding the 1976 Census led to a review by the Law Reform Commission which, while making some recommendations for improvements, fundamentally supported the ABS' methods and processes, including the requirement for names to be collected on the schedule. This was due to the clear evidence that names strongly encourage people to fill in the Census form and to be more accurate in their responses. Collecting names also makes it possible to undertake follow up surveys to subsets of households, to help assess the quality of Census data.

Asking the people – the Censuses of 1981 and 1986

In comparison to the 1970s, the Censuses of the 1980s were relatively trouble free. Roy Cameron was appointed the Australian Statistician in 1977 and in the lead up to the 1981 Census the ABS concentrated on improvements in the quality of the Census and on wider consultation. For the first time, the ABS advertised through major newspapers for public submissions on topics for the next Census. The ABS received over 1600 suggestions for topic inclusions (with 40 entirely new topics recommended) and only around 60 submissions for topics' exclusion. Extensive testing was undertaken and topics found not suitable for the Census were often recommended for surveys.

In 1981, a question on the total number of children a woman had ever had was asked for the first time. While desirable for determining fertility levels and trends, it hadn't been asked previously as it was seen as too sensitive. Instead, less useful questions had been used, asking only about children of marriage, and the question had been removed entirely from the 1933 Census form. By 1981, social mores had changed, and there had been lobbying by unmarried parents to include their children.

A new topic, on ancestry, was included for the first time in 1986. This topic had been developed by a committee specifically established to resolve the issue of a lack of sufficient information about ethnicity in the Census.

The goals for the 1981 Census reflected the difficulties of the 1970s with aims to reduce the size of the form and minimise the information required from the public. There was also a complementary goal of improving the quality of the data by reducing the number of people missed by the Census and the numbers of people not answering each question.

Roy Cameron retired in 1985 and Ian Castles was appointed Australian Statistician in 1986. Castles encouraged the ABS to return to more statistical analysis of the Census and during his time considerably more analytical Census publications were released.

In 1986, industrial action by staff of the Australian Electoral Commission in two states meant that the ABS took over managing the collection in those states.

The quality of the Census also came under the spotlight in 1986 with significant improvements to family data. More accurate counts of single parent families were made possible, through the coding of temporarily absent household members, while a change to the relationship question meant de facto and blended families could be identified for the first time.

In 1986, CD-ROMS were first introduced as a means of data release. In doing so, the ABS was using technology in advance of most Australian businesses at the time. As a result it found it necessary to sell CD-ROM readers as well.

Capturing the content – the Censuses of 1991 and 1996

The 1991 Census was the first Census since 1921 to be run completely by the ABS with the Australian Electoral Office no longer involved in collection management. From 1991, the date for the Census was moved from June to August to minimise the likelihood of the Census overlapping with school or public holidays in the states and territories.

In processing the forms, optical mark recognition was used for the first time, alongside computer-assisted coding. Some new tick boxes were included on the form and this had effects on the data. For those topics where tick boxes only listed the top responses from the previous Census (because the possible responses were too numerous to list), people showed a slight preference for ticking a box over writing in a response.

In 1994, Ian Castles retired and Bill McLennan was appointed the Australian Statistician in 1995. Bill McLennan had most recently been the Director of the UK Central Statistical Office and prior to that had had a long career in the ABS.

From 1996, a digital map database that encompassed every locality in Australia made the manual drafting of thousands of collector maps unnecessary. The same database was also used for the maps released as part of the data output. This Census was the first to release the data in two stages with data that was quicker and easier to process (such as age and sex) released earlier, and the more complex data (such as occupation) released later. This allowed much of the data to be released substantially earlier than in previous Censuses.

The Census in the 21st century – 2001 to 2011

Dennis Trewin was the Australian Statistician during the 2001 and 2006 Censuses, having been appointed in 2000. Following Dennis Trewin's retirement in 2007, Brian Pink was appointed Australian Statistician.

The first Censuses of the 21st century included a focus on new technology, with questions about the use of personal computers in the home and the use of the internet.

New technology also impacted in an unexpected way with a world-wide email/internet campaign based on the mistaken idea that if enough people recorded their religion as 'Jedi Knight', then Statistical Bureaux around the world would be forced to include 'Jedi' as a legitimate religion. This was untrue but did not stop



Australian Statistician Mr Brian Pink hands over the Time Capsule information from the 2006 Census to the Director-General of the National Archives of Australia, Mr Ross Gibbs | ABS collection

people from trying. The 70,000 people who reported Jedi in the 2001 Census became part of the classification ‘religion – inadequately described.’

A big change this century was the decision in 2001 to allow each householder to choose to allow their name-identified information to be preserved for posterity, with the idea that in the future it will be of interest to genealogists and social historians. This followed the recommendation of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs. The Committee took into account submissions from those who wanted all name-identified Census forms to be kept and concerns expressed, particularly by the ABS, that keeping name-identified information could compromise the quality of the data. This was because confidentiality and privacy assurances had been built based on the fact that name-identified information was not kept. For example, Census forms are pulped after processing and names are stripped from processed data. It was felt that keeping the forms without the public’s consent would seriously erode public confidence in the ABS’ privacy and confidentiality assurances. In 2006, over 50% of the population chose to have their Census forms kept for posterity. These microfilmed forms are to be kept confidential for 99 years by the Australian Archives before being released.

There were also two new topics in 2006, on unpaid work and need for assistance. These questions reflect decades of effort to resolve long held client requests for such data. The 2011 Census will be conducted on a basis comparable to the 2006 Census, due to financial constraints within the ABS.

As a consequence, all topics asked in the 2006 Census have been retained in 2011 and no new topics have been added.

In 2006, many Australians completed their Census form on the internet. While it had been tested in 2001, the system was fully functioning in 2006 with nearly 10% of households submitting their forms this way. The eCensus system has been redeveloped for 2011 using web 2.0 technologies to create a faster, more efficient application. The ABS is aiming to have at least 30%, and perhaps even 40% of Australian households complete their Census form via the Internet.



Publicity photo 2006 Census | ABS collection

Though it's a long way from the stiff cards and manual sorting of 1911, the Census of 9 August 2011 builds on the important work of those who organised the first national Census 100 years ago.

Endnotes

1. Knibbs, GH, & Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics (Australia) 1911, *The first Commonwealth census, 3rd April, 1911 : notes / by G.H. Knibbs, Commonwealth Statistician* Government Printer, Melbourne. [Back to article](#)
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